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# STANFIELD HALL.

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Author of "Minnigrey." "Woman and Her Master," &c.



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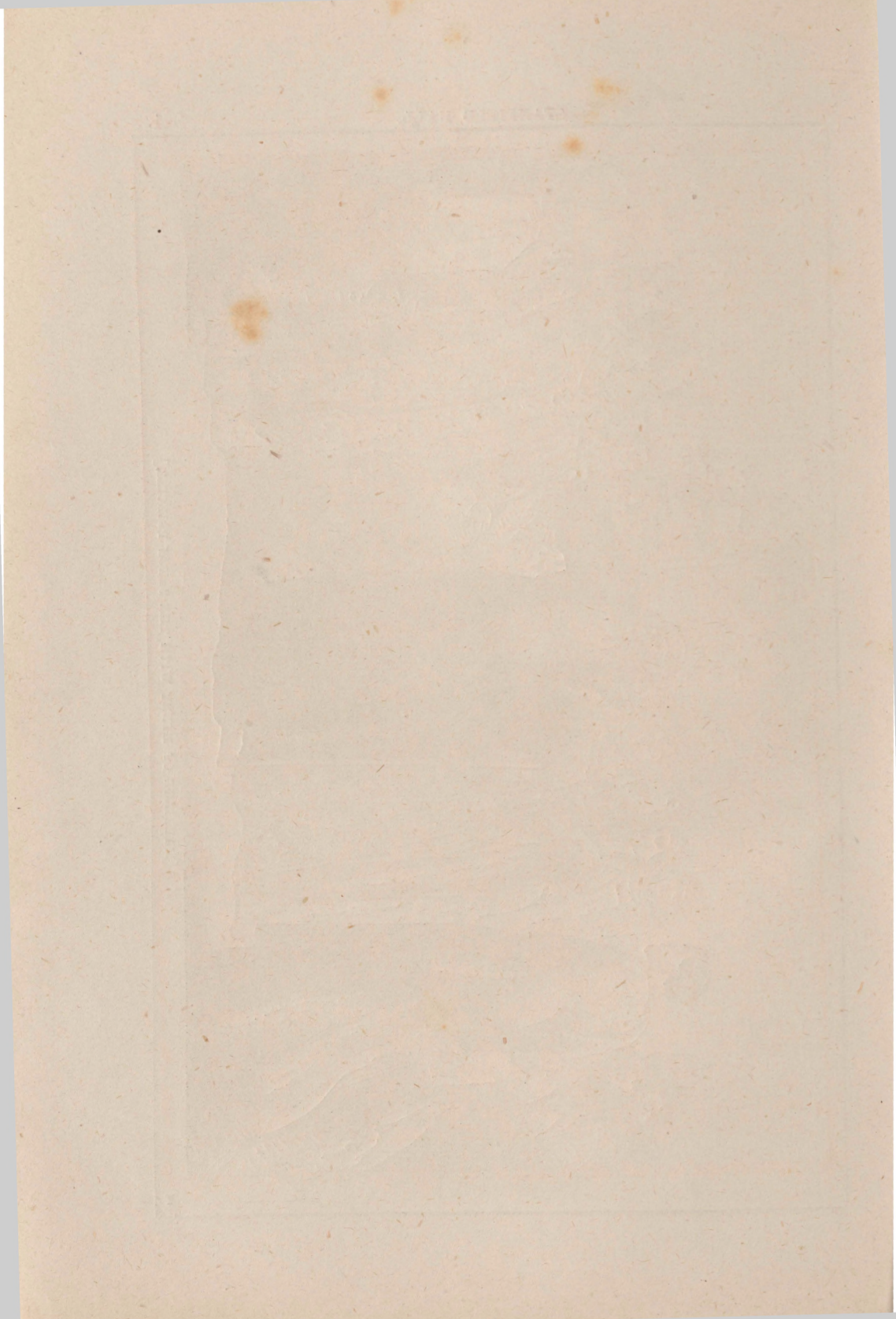
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[MARRIAGE OF HENRY WITH THE SAXON PRINCESS.]







aversion, would succeed him. He resolved, therefore, to marry, and secure, if possible, a direct successor to his crown. By means of spies, he discovered that his younger brother frequently visited the convent at Rumsey, where the Princess Matilda, daughter of Malcolm, the third king of Scotland, resided, under the protection of her aunt, the abbess Christina. Although, during the lifetime of her uncle and brothers, Matilda was not the heiress of the Saxon line, still she was dear to the nation on account of her connection with it. Her lover—for such Prince Henry in secret was—had never forgotten the prediction of the aged monk, Father Segsil, at Croydon. Ambition had tempted him in his first visit to the convent; but the virtues and beauty of the recluse soon inspired him with a purer motive, and he loved—truly, passionately loved. Nor was it long ere he won from the fair girl's lips the confession that he was beloved again. We may imagine, therefore, his fury and despair when Tyrrel, with a malicious smile, announced to him his brother's intentions of proceeding to the convent, and to give England a queen in the person of the Saxon princess. Deeply as he felt wounded, both in love and in ambition, by the intelligence, he was too much a courtier to give his enemy the triumph of perceiving that the shaft had reached him, and he parried the thrust by demanding, in his turn, when the king was to bestow on him the so long promised earldom, which his services merited. This was a sore subject with the traitor, and he winced beneath the thrust. Despite all that he had done (and his services to William had been as varied as they were unscrupulous) the recompense was as distant as ever. The monarch still put him off with promises; nay, seemed to take a malicious pleasure in exciting his hopes only to disappoint them. Indeed, his intention in this respect was frequently so apparent, that the traitor often questioned whether the secret of his birth was not even known or guessed at by the tyrant, and the suspicion but added to his shame and disappointment.

"William will find," said Tyrrel, with a scowl, "that even my loyalty may be urged too far. He hath broken promise and oath with me; and yet the latter," he added, with a peculiar smile, "was a strange one."

"It would have been stranger," observed Prince Henry, "had he kept it. Humph!" he added, as he turned upon his heel and left the knight, "that fellow might be useful; he hath a conscience as pliant as a courtier's back."

That very night the unhappy lover sought an interview with Anselm; an achievement of no common danger, for since the recovery of his health the Red King's remorse had disappeared, and he bitterly regretted that ever he had been induced to bestow the primacy upon a character so cold and so unyielding as Anselm. Since their dispute, the episcopal palace had been continually surrounded with spies; and those nobles were sure of being visited



with their monarch's displeasure who either visited or entertained relations of amity with its master. It was not, therefore, without reason that the prince took the precaution of disguising himself in a monk's gown and capuchin to obtain access to him. Cold as Anselm was, he was not incapable of friendship. He had not forgotten the previous visits of Henry to Westminster, when he was only Abbot of Bec, and he received him again, if not with warmth, at least with cordiality, and listened to his tale with deep interest.

"What!" exclaimed the primate, when Henry had related his tale; "wed with a nun professed! Is William mad? or does he dream the Church's thunders slumber in our hand? There must be some deceit in this; he never dares attempt it."

"You mistake, venerable father," sighed the anxious lover; "Matilda is not a nun: she has only worn the veil as a protection in these lawless times, when even the altar can scarce protect its own. Her lips as yet have breathed no vow which sunders her for ever from the world."

"Then am I powerless!" exclaimed the churchman. "Had she been wedded to the altar, I would have snatched her from a hundred kings; but, as it is, Rufus may claim her person: he is the guardian of every orphan in the realm."

"But still," said Henry, and then paused.

"Still what?" demanded Anselm, fixing his eyes upon the hesitating speaker.

"The Church may claim her still. Who is to know her vow is yet unspoken, if you assert it is? Pardon me, holy father," he added, sinking on his knee as he marked the frown on the prelate's brow; "but despair hath made me mad. I love the fair Matilda, not with the rash impulse of a lawless love, but truly, nobly, with a passion worthy her name and mine. Again," he added, "my tyrant brother threatens to cross my path. He hath despoiled me, and I have borne it patiently; plotted against my life, and I have forgiven him; but let him touch my love, my heart's first hope, my manhood's prize, and I will beard him in his strength. Like himself, I have the blood of the same fiend-begotten ancestor within my veins. Let him beware how he arouses it."

"This is the very frenzy of despair. Hast thou forgot he is thy king as well as brother?" demanded Anselm. "But perchance it is ambition leads thee to seek the Saxon princess's hand. Her name, in the event of William's death, would pave her husband's pathway to the throne. And I have not now to learn that Henry of Normandy aspires to the crown."

"At present he aspires only to the love of the fair Matilda," answered the young man.

"And I will aid thee!" exclaimed Anselm, after a pause, during which he had well scrutinised the features of his visitor—"when does Rufus start for Rumsey?"



"With the dawn. With him to will is to perform. He knows no procrastination in the search of interest or pleasure."

"I will place a bar between him and his hopes," resumed the primate, "which, powerful as he is, he cannot break. Farewell, and thank thy fortunes for this visit; it hath saved the maiden from the tiger's fangs. No words—I know the gratitude of princes. I will save Matilda for her own sake as well as thine."

That very night the archbishop, attended only by a slender train, left the metropolis, and directed his way towards the convent where the princess, unconscious of her danger, resided, in her holy, calm retirement.

On the second day after his departure, William, attended by a numerous suite of nobles and retainers, entered the small town of Rumsey. With a refinement of cruelty which only a heart like his would have been capable of, Prince Henry was forced to be of the party. The only hope of the unhappy lover was in the promise which Anselm had made. Although he could not foresee the means, he doubted not of the power of the holy man to perform his word, for his influence was scarcely second to that of the Red King himself.

On arriving at the front of the convent, they found the gates closely barred; nor was it till the third summons of the herald, who demanded admittance in the name of the monarch, that the venerable and noble abbess condescended to make her appearance at the gate. Proud of her royal birth, and still more of her spiritual authority, the aged Christina demanded, in a cold, calm tone, the cause of the king's visit to her humble cell; for so, in the mock humility of the age, she designated the truly magnificent establishment over which she had so long and honourably presided.

"I come to claim my ward," impatiently exclaimed the tyrant—"the Saxon princess, Matilda, who hath too long been lost in the obscurity of the cloister—to place her in a sphere where the homage due alike unto her birth and matchless beauty shall encircle her—in a word, good mother, to place her on the throne to which she is so nearly allied in blood."

"Matilda is the bride of Heaven," answered the abbess, "and earthly love, e'en though a monarch's, were a sacrilege too fearful to be dwelt on. Retire, then, prince, and leave the house of God to its poor inmates, who ask but liberty to pray for the welfare of their country and the salvation of their souls in solitude and silence. Again I do repeat it, Matilda is professed."

"'Tis false," said the infuriated Rufus; "none of your holy trickery with me, your pious mummery, and holy cant! Give entrance to the convent, or by my father's soul, I'll batter the sacred rookery down! Fit fate for such a nest of treason and rebellion!"

"The will of Heaven be done!" exclaimed the aged abbess.



"Come, then, and, if thou darest, rend the Church's bride e'en from the nuptial altar ; but beware," she added, sternly, "the curse of the saint from whose embrace you tear her. Weak as my voice is, it shall yet be heard in heaven for vengeance on the sacrilege and crime. Unbar the gates," she added to her attendants, "and let the monarch enter."

Without deigning an obeisance to the tyrant, the venerable speaker retired from the gate, and in a few minutes the ponderous doors of the church were flung wide, and Rufus and his nobles entered.

The scene which met their view was well calculated to impress the superstitious nobles with awe. As they advanced slowly down the centre aisle, in every stall of the choir was seated the immovable form of a veiled nun. The superior had resumed her seat upon her abbatial throne, close to the high altar, which blazed with a hundred lighted tapers ; clouds of rich incense filled the air, and partially obscured the group of priests who officiated before the sacred shrine. In the centre of them might be perceived the kneeling form of the young princess, divested of her rich attire, and robed in the simple habit of a nun ; a long tress of her golden hair, lately severed from her fair head, lay upon the altar ; and as William and his train gained the centre of the church, the black veil held by the officiating priest descended like a cloud upon her head. The heart of the unhappy Henry failed him at the sight ; it seemed the knell of hope.

"What trickery is this ?" demanded William, his cheek and brow flushed with rage at the sight. "Where is the Saxon princess, the niece of Edgar Atheling ?"

"Dead !" replied the abbess ; "the princess Matilda lives no more."

"Dead !" echoed the king and nobles.

"Dead," resumed the abbess, "to the world ; she is a nun professed. Raise, sisters, the hymn to invoke the blessing of the Most High upon the sacrifice."

In obedience to the command of their superior, the nuns had commenced the "Veni Creator" before the disappointed king had recovered himself sufficiently to interrupt them. His harsh discordant voice was soon, however, heard above the choral strain of the trembling cloistered maids.

"And who," he exclaimed, "without my license, hath dared to do this ? Bear witness all," he added, "the rites are not yet complete ; that, without my sanction, they are invalid. Matilda is destined to a throne ; she is my ward, and thus I claim my right."

The speaker strode to the rails of the altar, which he burst recklessly open, and advanced to seize the trembling girl, who clung to the sanctuary for protection. Already had his rude hands grasped her veil, when the deep voice of the primate, whose presence he had not perceived amongst the crowd of priests, arrested the



impious act ; he started at the sound ; the hiss of a serpent had been more grateful in his ear.

"Tis well, prince," said the churchman ; "is not the measure of thy iniquity yet full ? Thou hast widowed the Church of her bishops ; applied to ambition and ungodly waste the revenues of the sequestered sees, the patrimony of heaven and the poor ; and now, to complete thy guilt, thou comest with armed men and sinful violence to rend the spotless bride of Christ from His insulted altar. Back," he added, "ere the justice of offended Deity levels the thunder of its wrath against thee ; back, ere I place thy realm in interdict, and breathe on thee, and all that aid thy evil passions, the sentence of the Church."

At the sound of Anselm's voice the most devoted followers of Rufus drew back ; they knew too well his stern, unbending nature and vast influence with the people, from his reputed sanctity, to brave him. The Red King alone maintained his ground, and confronted the courageous primate.

"I will at once appoint bishops to the vacant sees !" he exclaimed, trusting to bribe Anselm to acquiescence by the promise ; "restore the revenues !"

"Back," repeated the archbishop, sternly.

"Yield on the point of the investitures," he added.

"Back," continued the unmoved prelate.

"Confirm the Church's liberties."

"Back," iterated the churchman, who knew too well the character of the monarch to trust his promises, or be deceived by them into a dereliction of his duty.

Seeing that his commands were not obeyed, the archbishop advanced to the altar, and taking in his hands the legatine cross, held it up slowly before the people : every knee, except William's, was bent in the church at the sight. Then followed a breathless pause, for all guessed the fearful words about to follow.

"Let all who would not share in the excommunication," he continued, "pass the threshold of the church. If a single armed foot but cross the sacred line an inch, a breadth, a hair, on him and on his race I breathe the curse of Heaven."

"What !" exclaimed William, as he saw the nobles slowly quit the church, "will you desert me at yon shaveling's bidding ? Salisbury, Mortimer, Warrenne ! is this your loyalty ? Traitors !" he added, when he saw that all but himself had passed the limit prescribed by the primate, "your lands shall pay the forfeit of this treason."

"We will not war against the Church !" exclaimed the nobles. "Our lands were won by our good swords ; our swords shall still maintain them. Thou art the king, but he is the archbishop."

"He is a traitor !" hoarsely muttered the king, at the same time laying his hand upon his sword.



"Strike!" said the prelate, "and crown my pilgrimage with the martyr's glorious crown; strike, and deluge the shrine of God with blood; strike and set the seal of death upon thy guilty soul. Lo!" he added, snatching the veil of Matilda from his grasp, "I defy thee; king as thou art, I thrust thee forth from out the sacred precincts. Armed with the Church's banner, I oppose thee—drive thee like a fierce wolf from out the sacred fold."

The instant William drew his sword the horror-stricken nobles cried out "Sacrilege!" and had rushed into the church, had not the previous command of the archbishop restrained them.

William, subdued by the firmness of his enemy, and alarmed at the spirit displayed by his hitherto obsequious barons, recoiled as the prelate advanced, and retreated backwards till he had passed the threshold, Anselm following him all the while under the protection of his cross. As soon as the royal intruder was expelled, the primate with his own hands closed the gates, and the choir burst forth spontaneously in a hymn of triumph.

In an irritated mood, the baffled tyrant returned to London, and immediately afterwards, attended only by Tyrrel and a few of his immediate followers, started for the New Forest, created by the devastation of his father, to indulge in the pleasures of the chase.

On the third morning after his arrival, at an early hour, he left Winchester, accompanied by William de Bretnil, Tyrrel, and others, for the hunt. Fortunately for the fair fame of his brother, Prince Henry on that fatal day remained in Winchester, or a share in the death of the tyrant had doubtless been attributed to him.

Rufus, like all the princes of his line, was extremely jealous of his prerogatives in hunting. Volumes might be filled with the cruelties inflicted by the Norman sovereigns upon the transgressors of the game-laws. The chase was their ruling passion, and Tyrrel shared in the instincts of his race. In a sylvan glade of the forest he had stricken a royal deer, which was so designated from the number of branches on its antlers; his foot was already upon the neck of the palpitating victim—the knife in his hand ready to give the *coup de grâce*, when a horseman broke through the intervening brushwood. It was Rufus, whose evil genius had sent him to be a witness of the act.

"Villain!" he exclaimed, "it is a royal hart. What insolence is this?—e'en in our very presence to strike our prize!"

Tyrrel murmured something about not having counted the number of branches on its antlers.

"I'll teach thee how to count!" interrupted the furious monarch. "By heavens, it is a hart of grease fit for a king to chase! A prison may teach thee better manners, knave. Should the hound be served before its master?"

Stung by the insult, and alarmed at the menaces of the tyrant, who had never been known to pardon an offence against the forest



laws, Tyrrel became desperate. The consciousness of high birth and merited degradation—of William's broken promises, had engendered a flood of venom in his heart, which wanted but one added drop to make it overflow. That drop the last words of Rufus gave.

"Hound!" iterated Tyrrel. "Hear! 'Tis thou who art the hound, and I thy master. Remember thy oath—'*May the keenest arrow in thy quiver pierce my perjured heart if I break faith with thee.*' The faith hath been broken, and the hour of vengeance hath at last arrived."

"Traitor!" said Rufus, half-drawing his sword.

"Traitor to thy teeth!" exclaimed Tyrrel, as he fixed the fatal arrow to his bow. "Know 'tis thy injured brother Robert's son who strikes—whose avenging arrow rids England of her tyrant, and peoples hell with another of his fated race."

That very night the body of the Red King was conveyed to Winchester in a common cart by a peasant family named Purkiss, who had found it in the forest, and the guilty Tyrrel sailed in a fishing boat from the land where his birth entitled him to reign.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

ON hearing of the death of his brother, Prince Henry felt that the moment had arrived for the realisation of his long cherished and deeply meditated schemes of ambition. His first step was to hasten to the episcopal palace in Winchester, and secure the treasures of the late king—an act which he successfully accomplished, despite the remonstrances of their keeper, De Breteuil, who frankly told him that they were the property of his legitimate sovereign and elder brother Robert. The impetuous prince drew his sword, and menaced him with death in the event of his resisting him; and being backed by a considerable number of barons, whom he had gained over to his cause, that faithful officer was compelled to yield. Two days afterwards, feeling himself sufficiently strong, Henry threw off the mask, and proclaimed himself king; his elder brother's absence from the kingdom materially facilitated his obtaining possession of the crown. Thus the rights of Robert were a second time set aside by the successful usurpation of the younger princes. After a short struggle, during which that unfortunate man displayed his usual reckless courage and inconsistency, a compromise was entered into, chiefly by the influence of the primate Anselm. The elder brother resumed his duchy of Normandy, and acknowledged Henry as king, on condition that the latter paid him a considerable pension annually.

Ulrick had been amongst the first of the few nobles who joined the standard of the legitimate monarch, and the very last to counsel his abdication of his rights—a conduct which, when the



struggle had terminated, did him no injury in the friendship of Henry, who, of all his brother's partisans, excepted the lord of Stanfield alone from feeling the weight of his resentment, and even invited him to be present at his nuptials with the Princess Matilda, which, as soon as the peace was concluded, he prepared to celebrate with all due pomp at Westminster.

A council of prelates had been previously held by Anselm, who declared before them that the vow taken by the Saxon maiden had only been conditional, as a means of protecting her from the tyranny of the late king. The reasons were found valid, and Matilda pronounced at liberty to marry by the unanimous judgment of the assembly.

The abbey church was crowded by nobles and their high-born dames, who vied with each other in the cumbrous magnificence of their costume. Despite the censures of the Church (and the primate had fulminated them loud and frequently) against the prevailing fashion of the day—the long-toed shoes, looped with silver, and not unfrequently golden, chains to the knee—the wearers of these forbidden ornaments were numerous and bold : the occasion of displaying their preposterous finery was too tempting to be lost, but the most prudent took care to draw back from the circle which surrounded the archbishop, whose inflexibility they well knew and dreaded. This ridiculous mode lasted nearly two centuries, despite the prohibition of the Church, which even in the plenitude of its power, when its thunders could crush a throne, found them impotent against a fashion. Such are the anomalies of poor, weak human nature.

The shouts of the people, who were transported at the idea of the descendant of their ancient monarchs sharing the Conqueror's throne, announced the arrival of Henry and his bride, who soon afterwards entered the church, followed by the abbess of Rumsey, the aged Princess Christina, Ulrick, Matilda, and a stately train of chivalry and beauty. As the bridal procession moved towards the high altar, where Anselm, attended by his suffragan bishops, stood ready to perform the rite, Ulrick's thoughts naturally reverted to the aged monk at Croydon, who had prophesied to Henry his high fortune, and its continuance, provided he married in the royal Saxon line ; nor did he fail to remember the prediction touching his own fate—"a life of unblemished honour, but a broken heart." "Let it come," he murmured to himself ; "provided it spare those I love, I fear not the bolt myself."

He was soon, however, diverted from such sombre thoughts by the commencement of the ceremony.

The archbishop had scarcely pronounced the first words of the service, when a loud voice from the back of the altar commanded him to forbear. In an instant all was confusion ; men gazed upon each other, and with inquiring eyes seemed to demand the cause of



such unseemly interruption. The superstitious trembled, for the sound evidently came from the shrine of St. Edward the Confessor, whose canonised bones rested behind the altar. After a few moments' pause, during which Henry endeavoured to reassure his trembling bride, just as Anselm was about to recommence the ceremony, the command was repeated in a still louder tone than before, and the tall, stately form of Father Segsil, the aged monk of Croydon, was seen slowly advancing from the tomb of the sainted king, whose name was still so dear to every Saxon heart. Though clad merely in the ample, flowing, dark robe of his order, prelates and nobles were alike impressed with awe at his appearance. A long silver beard fell in waving masses upon his breast, his features, though sharp with age and vigil, retained traces of former beauty as well as dignity; bright blue eyes flashed from beneath a lofty brow, such as the divine Angelo in after years gave to the prophet Moses. Time, as loth to touch perfection, had laid his hand most gently upon him; his noble form was but slightly bent with the weight of a hundred years; and as he slowly advanced, guiding his steps with a simple staff, all involuntarily made way for him, till he stood before the altar, confronting Henry and the archbishop.

Fixing a searching glance upon the bridegroom, he demanded in a tone in which a monarch might have addressed his vassal, or the priest of Jove proclaimed his antique oracle to some expectant worshipper:

"Dost thou remember me, O king?"

Henry, who was too much impressed by the sudden apparition to reply, bowed his head in token of his recognition of the speaker, whom, from his vast age, he had long since considered as numbered with the dead.

"All I foretold thee is accomplished," resumed the old man: "the Red King sleeps within his grave, and thou art king."

"Most true, good father," replied the monarch, who had quickly recovered from his surprise.

"I told thee, prince, that we should meet again—meet at the proudest moment of thy life—and I have kept my word. But if this marriage," added the monk, "is indeed to bind the Norman and the Saxon race in the strong chain of love—to heal the wounds of mutual hate, and give a long divided country peace—no voice but mine must celebrate the rite. It is for this that I have lived. This one act accomplished, I have done with life, and all its waking dreams."

"Art mad, my brother?" exclaimed the archbishop, indignant that a simple monk should interfere with his high office. "Who art thou that, at thy bidding, England's primate should resign his functions?—speak! I love not priests who deal in mysteries."

With a feint smile, Father Segsil approached the angry prelate,



and whispered a single word into his ear ; the effect was electrical.

Anselm started, and regarded the old man with an air of mingled awe, astonishment, and respect. Bowing his head in acquiescence, he took from one of the attendant bishops his consecrated stole, and placed it with his own hands around the neck of the aged man ; saying, as he did so :

“It is most just. The will of Heaven be done.”

Henry and his bride were both too much struck by the lofty bearing of Father Segsil and the sudden act of the archbishop, to offer the least opposition. On a motion of the old man's hand they knelt before him, whilst with a firm voice, which sounded through the lofty aisles of the church like an echo from the grave, he pronounced the nuptial benediction. At the conclusion of the ceremony he laid his hand upon the head of the youthful queen, and blessed her even as a father might have blessed his child.

“Thou daughter of a hundred kings !” he cried ; “yet a few moments, and the voice which blesses thee shall be heard no more on earth, but it shall rise before the throne of the Most High, to implore His mercies upon thee and on thy people. Protect thy oppressed country ; be thou a refuge to the weak—a hope to the despairing ; so shall men bless thy name on earth, and angels write it in the Book of Life in heaven. So shall thy race—no, no,” he murmured, as, overcome by some sudden emotion, he sank into the arms of those around him. “Dark ! dark ! The spirit hath passed from me. I can see no more.”

“He is dying !” exclaimed Anselm, who had placed his finger upon the pulse of the aged monk ; “his race is run.”

“Hast thou no blessing, no gift for me ?” demanded Henry, bending his knee, and catching the hand of the expiring man, whose sudden death, after the accomplishment of the events he had so singularly foretold, struck him with religious awe and astonishment.

“I have,” faintly replied Father Segsil, opening with an effort his nearly closed eyes. “Where is St. Edward's crown ?”

“Upon my brow,” answered the king.

“And where his sceptre ?” he resumed, in a still weaker tone.

“I bear it in my hand.”

“All,” murmured the old man to himself, “all but the ring are there—St. Edward's ring, the matchless gem, graved with the holy cross. St. George, who won the ruby stone in Palestine, predicted it should ne'er be worn except by England's kings. Where,” he added, speaking in a still louder tone to the Norman prince, “where is the coronation ring of England's monarchs ?”

“Lost !” exclaimed the abbot of Westminster, who, from his office, was guardian of the regalia ; “lost on the field of Hastings. It is well known the Saxon monarch wore it in the battle ; it hath



never since been found, despite the recompense the Conqueror offered, the search his soldiers made."

Father Segsil, with an effort which seemed far beyond his expiring strength, raised himself from the arms of those who supported him, and gazed with an expression of mingled benevolence and dignity upon the youthful sovereign at his feet. Thrusting his hand into his bosom, he slowly drew from it the long-lost gem, and placed it with a mournful smile on Henry's finger, whispering as he did so:

"Now thou indeed art king!" and, exhausted by the effort, he fell back into the arms of those who were near him—a corpse. The young queen and her aunt, the aged abbess Christina, sank upon their knees and offered up their prayers for the dead.

"This is indeed a precious gift," said Henry, pointing to the ring and addressing the archbishop. "The good monk hath been its faithful guardian. He was a holy man," he added: "he foretold our succession to the crown—our marriage with Matilda. Bury him, my lord, like a prophet and a saint."

"Bury him like a king," replied the primate, "for such, in truth, he was."

"A king!" repeated Henry and the nobles who were near.

"A king," iterated Anselm. "God hath miraculously prolonged his days beyond the usual span. But I repeat, the voice which all heard pronounce upon our monarch and his queen the nuptial benediction was the voice of Harold the Saxon king, so long thought slain upon the field of Hastings. Peace to his memory—honour to the brave and the unfortunate!"

This strange discovery accounted for the interest the monk had taken in the marriage of Henry and Matilda. It was afterwards fully confirmed by documents left by the preceding abbot of Croydon, to whom the defeated monarch, immediately after the battle of Hastings, had made himself known, and by whose advice he had devoted himself to the Church.

The obsequies of the aged prince were privately, but regally, celebrated by night, in the church where he had resigned his latest breath, his last resting place being at the foot of the holy Confessor's tomb, and known but to the few who assisted at his interment, and to whom the secret was confided.

Immediately after the marriage of Henry, Ulrick returned to Stanfield. All hope of throwing off the yoke of the Norman race was abandoned on the union of the princess Matilda, whom the people loved for her charities and many virtues, as well as for her Saxon descent, and prayed that she might be the mother of a race of monarchs to succeed her—a prayer destined to disappointment, as she died without issue many years before Henry, who, soon after her death, married again, in the hopes of an heir, but was equally doomed to hope in vain.



Ethra, Ulrick's eldest-born, was at the age of sixteen a tall, graceful, capricious, wayward girl; in her Madonna-like beauty she more resembled her grandmother, the once beautiful Edith, than either her father or Matilda. From her earliest childhood she had betrayed a strange passion for solitude, and frequently had alarmed her anxious parents and terrified her attendants by escaping from them to bury herself in the deepest recesses of the surrounding forests, where the distracted Ulrick had, on more than one occasion, found her seated by some babbling brook, singing to the murmuring waters, or couched, like a young fawn, within a mossy dell or flowery nook, weaving wild garlands of the simple flowers which grew around her. The sight of her innocent amusement and infantine beauty would arrest the reproof upon her father's lips. How was it possible to scold the fairy being whose musical laugh at the sight of him rang through the woodland glade? Ofttimes the words of anger were checked by a shower of kisses; for, despite her wild temper and strange taste for solitude, she loved her father with all the deep affection of her thoughtful nature; her heart clung to his as the graceful ivy clings around the majestic oak. She was proud of his courage and manly strength—proud of his fame, and the devotion of the Saxon race, who looked upon him as their protector—proud that he was her father.

Finding it impossible to restrain this peculiar disposition in his child, Ulrick resolved, as far as possible, to provide for her safety; for which purpose he trained two young bloodhounds, who gradually became so much attached to their fairy charge that they followed her in all her wanderings, stopped when she stayed, guarded her whilst she slept, and, with the wonderful instinct of their nature, permitted no one who was a stranger on the domain to approach her person. Ethra loved her savage, wild companions; for savage they truly were to all but her. Often, in sport, would she try to baffle their peculiar powers of tracking out those they sought, by concealing herself within the cleft of a rock, or climbing into the leafy branches of some lofty tree. The faithful animals seemed to understand and enjoy the sport. Aided by their exquisite scent, they invariably found her, and bayed with joy at the discovery. Some of the aged servants of the household predicted that no good could possibly arise from this strange companionship; and the old chaplain remembered a prophecy said to have been written by a former lord of Stanfield, which ran thus:

Woe to our house, when the maiden and hound  
A home in the halls of the stranger hath found;  
The raven and owl shall inhabit it then,  
And the wolf and the fox make its turrets their den.

Our hero, although far from superstitious, could not avoid being



struck by the singularity of the prediction, which he commanded to be carefully concealed from his wife, threatening with his severe displeasure any who should reveal it to her—a prohibition which caused the domestics but to repeat it the more frequently amongst themselves, till at last they became persuaded that their young mistress was the being whose evil fortune was to bring the long-predicted desolation upon the house of her fathers. They shook their heads ominously when the maiden and her dogs passed by them, and not infrequently signed the cross, or dropped a bead to Heaven for her safety ; for, strange and capricious as was her disposition, all who knew her felt themselves impelled to love her.

It was on a fine morning in September that the young heiress, clad in her simple dress of white, crossed the drawbridge, attended by her faithful followers, Thor and Woden ; for so they had been named, in honour of their pure Saxon blood. The warder shook his head as they passed him, and whispered to the seneschal his fears that the dreaded prediction was not far from its fulfilment—a confidence which the officer returned by informing him that death-lights had been seen in the chapel, a sure sign of misfortune to their master's race. The deep bay of the bloodhounds, and the joyous laugh of their charge, were soon lost in the recesses of the forest into which they plunged. Their cry startled the timid fawn from its secret lair and roused the antlered stag to direct its flight far from the nut-brown woods of Stanfield. The thoughtless, happy girl was making her way through the intricacies of the underwood—now recalling the dogs from the scent of the flying deer, now urging them on—when the animals suddenly uttered a deep growl, and darted down a narrow path which led to a fountain known by the name of the Druid's Well. Ethra immediately followed, fearful lest her companions, so ferocious to all but her, should attack some traveller, or peasant hastening to his labours. On reaching the spot she discovered the hounds both crouching, as if to spring upon an aged woman, who had evidently climbed the low projecting rock on which she stood for safety. Although dressed in mean attire, there was an air of dignity in her manner which struck the beholder with respect. Her foot was firmly planted, and a sort of staff, with a long knife at the end, such as might be used for cutting water plants, was grasped in her right hand, ready to strike her assailants in case they should approach her.

"Down, Woden—down, Thor !" cried the maiden, rushing between the excited dogs and the object of their attack ; "down, I say ! Do not fear, good mother," she added ; "they are obedient to my voice, and will not harm you."

"Do I look as if I feared them ?" exclaimed the woman, in a harsh voice. "It is long, very long, since I feared aught of earth,



and I might add of Heaven; the first can take from me nothing but life, and the latter is too merciful to harm me."

The woman descended as she spoke, and fixed a curious glance upon the fair girl who had so opportunely appeared to rescue her; for, despite her weapon and the courage with which she might have used it, the two dogs, who lay whining and crouching at their mistress's feet, would doubtless have torn her in pieces but for her interference.

"You are a stranger, mother, in these parts," said the maiden, meeting her glance with a look as bold and searching as her own. "If you have lost your way, I will guide you; if you are in distress, follow me to the castle, and I will relieve you. One good, at least, results from my strange wandering propensities—they lead me frequently to the succour of my fellow-creatures."

"Thou art, then, the daughter of Ulrick of Stanfield," exclaimed the woman; "she whom the superstitious peasants call the Forest Fairy? Thy beauty well deserves the name—thy goodness even more so than thy beauty. Farewell! I have no need of human guidance—human help. I dare not longer stay, lest, as I gaze upon thee, and read thy fate, my heart should feel once more the throb of sympathy and pity."

"And what will be my fate?" demanded Ethra, whose curiosity was excited, but not her fears.

"Canst thou bear to listen to it?" said the stranger, peering at her from beneath her bushy brows.

"I can bear much," answered the maiden, proudly. "Armed in my innocence, I have never yet experienced fear, though I have passed the lone hours in the forest, and marked the lengthening shadows creep silently upon my path—have felt the lightning's kiss upon my cheek, yet hath it never harmed me. While innocent, I laugh at fear."

"But when innocence hath left thee!" interrupted the woman, with a bitter laugh.

"I first must cease to be," replied Ethra, with offended dignity; "thou ravest of things impossible, good mother."

"I thought so once," shrieked the hag; "but, like thee, I was deceived. Hear me, proud daughter of a still prouder line. Thou hast asked to know thy fate, and I will not deny thee. Thou shalt love and be beloved, be won and scorned, be injured and avenged. Thou art in the toils: fly as thou wilt, thou canst not escape thy doom; for there is one upon thy track who never yet spared woman in his lust, or man in his revenge. Farewell! Perchance, when thy fate shall be accomplished, we may meet again."

The speaker had no sooner concluded her prediction than she plunged into the thick underwood which grew around the borders of the well, and disappeared ere the astonished Ethra could detain her. The two dogs, who had watched her with suspicion, sprang







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